



Repression And The Crisis Of Identity In Late Nineteenth-Century Gothic Literature

Author:

Shreya Anand

Department:

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University

ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this essay explores the connection between repression and identity crises in late nineteenth-century Gothic fiction. These books, which emerged from the moral and cultural conflicts of the Victorian era, depict a society that encouraged the concealing of socially inappropriate urges while demanding external respectability. The idea of a cohesive self is eventually undermined by such repression, which causes a psychological struggle between private urge and public identity. This study examines how both Stevenson and Wilde depict identity as brittle and divided when moral and emotional urges are repressed rather than integrated through in-depth textual analysis guided by psychoanalytic viewpoints. In Stevenson's story, suppression takes the form of Jekyll and Hyde's bodily separation, signifying the effort to separate impulse from morality. In Wilde's book, Dorian Gray's image serves as a metaphor for the accumulation of covert corruption while the protagonist pretends to be innocent. Both pieces demonstrate how repression exacerbates internal conflict and results in an identity crisis, despite their disparate narrative techniques. The study makes the case that Gothic fiction reveals the psychological effects of a society that prioritizes moral image over emotional authenticity by looking at various depictions.

INTRODUCTION

Significant intellectual and cultural changes that questioned conventional notions of morality, identity, and human nature occurred in the late nineteenth century. The control of one's own inclinations, social respectability, and moral discipline were highly valued in Victorian society. Maintaining one's standing in society required strict obedience to social norms, and public reputation was seen as a gauge of personal virtue. Beneath this façade of moral certainty, though, were profound fears of self-instability, duplicity, and hidden desires. Gothic literature emerged as a significant medium for writers to examine these conflicts, exposing the psychological effects of repressing urges that went against social norms. The Victorian era's moral and psychological milieu was significantly shaped by repression. People

were frequently forced to hide facets of their identities that did not conform to social norms because they were expected to control their emotions and impulses in accordance with strict moral standards. Repression exacerbated internal conflict rather than eradicating these urges, leading to an unstable or fragmented sense of self. Gothic literature often depicts this struggle through narrative or metaphorical forms that highlight the contrast between inner turmoil and external respectability. In this sense, the genre speaks to a larger cultural worry about the vulnerability of identity when it comes to the demands of moral compliance.

This essay explores how these two Gothic stories' identity crises are exacerbated by suppression. It contends, via careful textual study, that when moral urges are repressed rather than integrated, identity is essentially unstable in both Stevenson and Wilde. These texts highlight the conflicts between private desire and public morality and expose the limitations of Victorian notions of respectability by revealing the psychological effects of repression. As a result, Gothic literature develops into a potent literary genre for examining the intricacies of human identity in a society characterized by rigid moral standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Themes of suppression, moral uneasiness, and identity instability have often been highlighted in scholarly debates of Gothic literature from the late nineteenth century. The psychological conflicts created by Victorian social conventions, particularly the drive to preserve outward respectability while hiding socially inappropriate desires, are largely acknowledged by critics as being reflected in Gothic fiction from this era. Both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* have been extensively explored within this critical tradition as texts that dramatize the fragmentation of the ego under circumstances of moral repression. These works have been studied from a number of angles by academics, including Gothic tradition research, cultural analysis, and psychoanalytic criticism. The subject of duality and the symbolic portrayal of good and evil in human nature were frequently highlighted in early readings of Stevenson's book. The interaction between Jekyll and Hyde, according to critics, exemplifies the struggle between socially acceptable identity and suppressed primal urges. Subsequent critical perspectives, especially those impacted by psychoanalytic theory, have broadened this view by proposing that Hyde stands for suppressed facets of Jekyll's personality that surface when the limits of moral control are compromised. These investigations highlight how the story highlights the permanence of unconscious desire and the limits of Victorian belief in logical self-control.

RESEARCH GAP

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, themes like duality, moral anxiety, aestheticism, and degeneration have been extensively studied by academics; however, the role of repression as a key element in causing an identity crisis has not been sufficiently explored. Many critical analyses either concentrate on the philosophical and cultural facets of Victorian morality or interpret these works in terms of the struggle between good and evil. Although these methods draw attention to the existence of divided identity, they frequently treat suppression as a supporting topic rather than as the fundamental process that causes the self to become unstable. Furthermore, a large portion of current research focuses on analyzing Stevenson's and Wilde's texts separately rather than providing a thorough comparative analysis of how repression functions in both stories. Because of this, the wider psychological ramifications of repressed drives for identity formation and disintegration are

still not well understood. By comparing how repression adds to the fragmentation of identity in both Gothic writings and showing how both authors depict the crisis of the self as the result of hidden desires and unresolved inner conflict, this study aims to close this gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the issue of repression and how it shapes the identity crisis in late nineteenth-century Gothic literature, this study takes a qualitative and analytical approach. Close textual examination of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* serves as the main foundation for the study. The study explores how these works depict the psychological effects of repressed urges and moral conflict through a thorough analysis of narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, and theme aspects. The analysis can concentrate on the language and images employed by the writers to convey internal conflict and fractured identity through close reading.

Psychoanalytic viewpoints, especially those pertaining to Sigmund Freud's theories of repression and the unconscious, also inform the study. These theoretical ideas are employed as interpretive tools to comprehend how repressed emotions and concealed impulses affect the protagonists' behavior and contribute to the instability of their identities. The study takes into account the historical and cultural background of the Victorian era, particularly its emphasis on morality, respectability, and self-control, which promoted the suppression of socially inappropriate desires, in addition to textual analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on psychoanalytic literary theory, namely Sigmund Freud's idea of repression. Psychoanalytic critique examines how human behavior and identity are shaped by repressed impulses, unconscious urges, and internal psychological conflicts. According to Freud, repression happens when people suppress undesirable urges or wants in order to live up to moral and social norms. These repressed urges, however, do not go away; rather, they resurface in distorted or indirect forms, frequently causing psychological instability and tension. This theoretical viewpoint offers a crucial foundation for comprehending how moral conflict and suppressed urges contribute to the fragmentation of identity in Gothic literature. The internal conflict that the protagonists in the chosen texts go through is further explained by Freud's structural model of the mind, which consists of the id, ego, and superego. The superego expresses moral conscience and social norms, whereas the id represents innate urges and wants that seek instant gratification. Between these conflicting forces, the ego serves as a mediator. Repression may take place as a means of upholding social order and individual control when the struggle between desire and moral constraint becomes too great. However, suppressing primal urges frequently results in internal strife that undermines the idea of a cohesive self.

Victorian Morality and the Culture of Repression

Morality, discipline, and social respectability were highly valued during the Victorian era. Maintaining a good public image was highly valued by society, and people were expected to control their behavior in accordance with rigid moral standards. A culture that placed a great importance on external virtue was shaped by religious influence, societal expectations, and inflexible class systems. People were therefore urged to hide feelings, impulses, and desires that went against societal norms. Personal identity was frequently influenced by the urge to appear morally upright due to the emphasis on propriety and self-control. But there was also a lot of psychological strain brought on by this rigid moral code. Victorian culture created concerns about moral violation and secret impulses at the same

time that it sought moral discipline. People were required to repress urges that were deemed inappropriate by society, especially those pertaining to pleasure, sexuality, and individual autonomy. Repression frequently exacerbated these urges rather than eradicating them, leading to a mismatch between inner experience and external conduct. The late nineteenth-century cultural environment was characterized by this conflict between private yearning and public respectability.

Gothic literature from this age often explores the effects of repression and identity instability, reflecting these worries. Gothic narratives were employed by writers to reveal the paradoxes and hidden anxieties of Victorian society. The delicate line between moral appearance and interior conflict is revealed by the characters' frequent struggles with hidden desires that threaten to upend their respectable identities. Gothic fiction emphasizes the psychological cost of a society that values external virtue while avoiding the recognition of complicated human wants by depicting suppression as a force that destabilizes the self.

Additionally, Victorian society's culture of repression had an impact on the period's creative imagination, especially in Gothic fiction. Gothic themes and characters were employed by writers to examine the inconsistencies and anxieties that lurked behind the surface of civilized civilization. Authors were able to portray the psychological effects of repressing natural impulses and emotions thanks to the Gothic mode. Gothic stories demonstrated how suppression might cause instability and moral struggle inside the individual through symbolic figures, duplicates, and deformed identities. In this setting, repression becomes both a social practice and a psychological state that influences literary depictions of identity, making the Gothic genre a crucial setting for analyzing the conflict between human desire and societal expectations.

Repression and the Fragmentation of Identity in The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

Robert Louis Stevenson examines the psychological effects of repression through Dr. Jekyll's dual identities in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Victorian culture frequently required people to hide desires that went against societal morals in order to keep a good public image. This conflict between hidden yearning and public respectability is symbolized by Jekyll. Despite being a well-respected physician and gentleman, he admits to having darker tendencies. Jekyll believes he can isolate immoral desires without harming his honorable self, so he uses scientific experimentation to try to detach these impulses from his identity rather than face them head-on.

The externalization of Jekyll's suppressed urges is symbolized by the creation of Hyde. Hyde represents the violent, harsh, and unbridled desires that Victorian society disapproves of. At first, Jekyll thinks he has successfully avoided moral responsibility by changing into Hyde. But in the end, the experiment shows that repression merely makes these impulses stronger rather than eliminating them. With every metamorphosis, Hyde becomes more powerful and progressively takes charge of Jekyll's identity. This loss of control serves as an example of how repressed impulses can resurface with more harmful power when they are not acknowledged.

Jekyll's identity grows more erratic as the story goes on. As Hyde starts to manifest without the aid of the pill, his attempts to keep his honorable self apart from his secret desires are unsuccessful. This unintentional change represents the blurring of the lines separating expression and suppression. Stevenson uses this psychological struggle to show how an identity based on hiding and denial cannot be stable. The tragedy of Jekyll is not that he has darker tendencies, but rather that he tries to suppress them instead of incorporating them into a cohesive self-concept.

The investigation shows that repression is a major factor in the characters' identity instability. In Stevenson's story, Dr. Jekyll believes he can maintain his respectable persona while enjoying

prohibited passions, so he creates Hyde in an attempt to separate his socially unacceptable inclinations. But in the end, this division collapses because his sense of control is threatened by the repressed urges. Dorian Gray's image serves as a metaphor for suppressed corruption in Wilde's book. The painting gradually exposes the moral ramifications of Dorian's activities as he maintains an air of innocence, highlighting the growing discrepancy between appearance and reality.

Social Respectability and the Fear of Moral Exposure

Social respectability was seen as one of the most significant markers of moral integrity in Victorian culture. In both public and private life, people were supposed to project an image of discipline, virtue, and moral rectitude. One's admittance in a respectable society was determined by their reputation, which served as a kind of social currency. Maintaining a perfect public image consequently became a major worry for many people. Because of the emphasis on external decency, it was frequently necessary to repress urges, desires, and actions that would jeopardize one's social status.

But there was also a strong dread of moral exposure brought on by the obligation to be respectable. In addition to being expected to act decently, people were always conscious that breaking social conventions could harm their reputation. Anxiety was created by the potential for secret misconduct to be exposed, which promoted concealment and secrecy. People tried to conceal parts of themselves that would go against social norms out of fear of being exposed, which strengthened the repressive culture. Gothic literature frequently reflects these social anxieties by portraying characters who struggle to maintain respectable identities while concealing darker impulses. The tension between public appearance and private reality becomes a central theme, highlighting the fragility of social respectability. By exposing the psychological consequences of this fear, Gothic narratives reveal how the desire to protect one's reputation can contribute to the repression of identity and ultimately lead to internal conflict and instability.

Gothic Literature as a Reflection of Psychological Conflict

Gothic literature has long been a potent tool for delving into the deeper aspects of human mind. The Gothic genre, which arose in reaction to intellectual, cultural, and social shifts, frequently mirrors the fears and anxieties that lurk behind the surface of daily existence. Many Gothic stories employ dark surroundings, enigmatic happenings, and symbolic figures to symbolize interior psychological problems rather than concentrating only on supernatural themes. Gothic literature uses these strategies to show how people struggle with morality, desire, and social expectations.

Gothic fiction's examination of internal turmoil is one of its main characteristics. A character's sense of stability is often threatened by repressed emotions, concealed desires, or conflicting identities. These psychic conflicts frequently manifest symbolically as doubles, warped reflections, or enigmatic metamorphoses. The struggle between the aware self and the unconscious parts of the mind can be dramatized by writers using these techniques. Gothic literature thus provides a platform for the indirect expression of suppressed desires and fears, illuminating the precarious equilibrium between order and chaos inside human identity.

Furthermore, Gothic narratives often highlight the consequences of ignoring or repressing these internal conflicts. When characters attempt to conceal their darker impulses or deny their inner struggles, the resulting tension intensifies rather than disappears. The Gothic genre portrays this

process through increasing instability, fear, and psychological breakdown. By presenting the mind as a site of conflict, Gothic literature reflects broader cultural concerns about the limits of rational control and the complexity of human nature. As a result, the genre offers a compelling exploration of how unresolved psychological tensions can shape identity and influence behavior.

Symbolism and the Representation of Repressed Identity

Symbolism plays a crucial role in Gothic literature by allowing writers to represent psychological conflicts that are difficult to express directly. Instead of describing inner turmoil in straightforward terms, Gothic authors often use objects, settings, and recurring images to symbolize the hidden aspects of human identity. These symbols function as reflections of suppressed emotions, moral anxiety, and internal division. Through symbolic representation, the Gothic genre reveals the tension between outward appearance and the concealed impulses that shape an individual's inner life.

Symbolic items become tangible representations of suppressed identity in many Gothic stories. These items frequently show what characters are trying to conceal from both society and themselves. For example, the photograph serves as a potent metaphor of the protagonist's concealed degeneration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian appears young and innocent on the outside, but the painting gradually shows the moral fallout from his deeds. The picture serves as a tangible documentation of the urges and wants he attempts to stifle, illustrating how inner conflict cannot be entirely eliminated by repression. Similarly, symbolic representation can be seen in [The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde](#), where the transformation into Hyde symbolizes the emergence of repressed instincts. Hyde represents the darker aspects of Jekyll's identity that Victorian morality forces him to conceal. The physical separation between Jekyll and Hyde highlights the attempt to divide respectable identity from forbidden impulses. Through such symbolic devices, Gothic literature illustrates how repression creates a fragmented sense of self, revealing that hidden desires inevitably surface despite attempts to control or suppress them.

The Gothic Double and the Fragmentation of Identity

One of the most important themes in Gothic literature is the idea of the Gothic double, which is frequently employed to symbolize the division inside human identity. The double usually manifests as an other self, character, or mirror that represents hidden facets of a person's nature. The twin frequently symbolizes repressed urges, anxieties, or desires that the main character tries to conceal rather than existing as a totally distinct entity. Gothic authors use this literary technique to examine the psychological conflict between one's visible identity and one's hidden aspects.

The Gothic double draws attention to the disintegration that happens when people try to suppress aspects of who they are. Characters frequently attempt to distinguish their honorable identities from their darker wants rather than combining opposing emotions into a cohesive sense of self. Because the repressed parts of the personality eventually resurface in unsettling or harmful ways, this division causes internal instability. As a result, the double becomes a metaphor for psychological conflict, showing how repression may split identity and create a feeling of internal conflict.

This idea is seen in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, when Jekyll's darker side is represented by Hyde. Jekyll is able to detach himself from these cravings while preserving a respectable public image since Hyde represents tendencies that Victorian society disapproves of. But

Hyde's increasing power shows that it is impossible to keep the two personalities apart. In the end, the Gothic double shows that the human self cannot be easily separated into distinct moral categories and that attempts to suppress particular facets of identity frequently result in fragmentation and catastrophe.

Conclusion

With a focus on *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this work has investigated how suppression adds to the identity problem in late nineteenth-century Gothic literature. Both books come from a Victorian cultural milieu that placed a strong emphasis on social acceptability and moral discipline, frequently pushing people to suppress urges that went against societal conventions. Gothic fiction often examines this issue through themes of psychological fragmentation and moral unease. This tension between outer identity and hidden yearning was produced by such repression.

Despite their different narrative strategies, both texts demonstrate that repression does not eliminate hidden impulses but intensifies psychological conflict. The attempt to maintain a divided identity ultimately leads to instability and self-destruction. Gothic literature thus exposes the fragile nature of identity in a society that prioritizes moral appearance over personal authenticity. By portraying the consequences of suppressed desire, these works reveal that the repression of inner impulses creates a crisis of identity rather than preserving social order.

Both books show that repression exacerbates psychological turmoil rather than eradicating hidden urges, despite their disparate storytelling techniques. In the end, trying to preserve a split identity results in instability and self-destruction. Thus, Gothic literature highlights the brittle nature of identity in a culture that values moral image over genuineness. These pieces demonstrate how suppressing inner urges leads to an identity crisis rather than upholding social order by depicting the fallout from repressed desire.

These stories also emphasize the wider cultural and psychological effects of suppression in Victorian society. Both authors highlight the shortcomings of a moral system based on rigid self-control and social conformity by depicting people who battle to uphold a respectable persona while hiding their underlying urges. The protagonists' crises is a reflection of both personal psychological struggle and a broader societal fear of human nature's unpredictability. As a result, Gothic literature becomes an effective tool for challenging the era's prevailing delusion of moral certainty. Through their examination of repression and fractured identity, these works imply that real psychological equilibrium can only be attained by acknowledging and integrating the intricate impulses that form human identity rather than by denying or hiding them.

WORKS CITED**Primary Sources**

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Secondary Sources

Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. Routledge, 1996.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by Joan Riviere, W. W. Norton, 1960.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, W. W. Norton, 1961.

Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Punter, David. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. Longman, 1996.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Methuen, 1980.

Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. Viking, 1990.

